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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NIAMEY 001190

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KCRM, NG
SUBJECT: NIGER: GOVERNMENT MOVES TO EXPEL NOMADIC ARABS

REF: NIAMEY 904

Classified By: POLITICAL OFFICER ZACH HARKENRIDER FOR REASON 1.4(B)

SUMMARY

11. (C) Since the evening of Tuesday, October 25, BBC Africa service has been reporting on an attempt by Government of Niger (GON) authorities to expel an uncertain number of nomadic Arabs known as "Mahamid Arabs" from the Chadian border region in the country's extreme east (Diffa region, near Lake Chad). On Tuesday evening, the GON's Minister of the Interior, Mounkaila Modi, issued an official statement on the expulsions, noting that Mahamids would be required to leave the country within five days. BBC reports further indicated that "several hundred" Mahamids had been rounded up by the Gendarmerie (Nigerien paramilitary police) in the village of Kabelawa, 75km east of Diffa. Spokesmen for the Mahamid community responded on Wednesday, denouncing the decision and stating that they would challenge it in parliament and the courts. Many Mahamids are reported to be citizens of Niger. A prior attempt to expel them in 2002 came to nothing. Niger Foreign Minister Aichatou Mindaoudou convoked Ambassadors and Charges at 14:50 local on Wednesday to explain the GON's justifications for the move. The Consular section has taken steps to contact Amcits in the region and ensure their security. NOTE: While BBC reports suggested that there were roughly 150,000 Mahamid Arabs in Niger, post's own estimates and those of local media suggest that the number ranges from 17,000 to 50,000. END NOTE
END SUMMARY

12. (U) On the evening of the 24th October, GON Interior Minister Mounkaila Modi issued a statement regarding the Mahamid Arabs. Modi noted that the Mahamid Arabs had fled conflict in their home country, Chad, and taken refuge in eastern Niger. However, they had now become a security and environmental threat for Niger. Modi noted that, since their arrival in Niger, the Mahamids had been in conflict with local populations over watering holes and grazing areas. Several Nigerien citizens had been killed in these conflicts. The Minister stated that Mahamids illegally owned firearms and had used them in disputes with Nigeriens. Mahamid livestock, allegedly numbering in the hundreds of thousands, were taxing the Diffa region's scarce pasturage and water resources, and destroying the local ecosystem.

13. (U) Private radio station Anfani broadcast excerpts from statements by Niamey based Mahamid leaders on October 25. The Mahamid leaders, who were reportedly in discussions with the

GON, denounced the expulsion order as "thoughtless and ill-inspired," and suggested that it would have "dangerous consequences," and could create a "large-scale conflict." They stated that Niger was violating the provisions of the AU Charter and the Lake Chad Basin Commission. The representatives claimed that theirs was a community of "tens of thousands" of nomadic Arabs who came to Niger from Chad in two waves, during the famines of the late 1960s, and the early 1980s. They claimed that, since their arrival in Niger, they had duly registered with Nigerien authorities, paid their taxes, and received other Nigerien legal documents. The leaders noted that most Mahamids know little of Chad, as they have been born and raised in Niger. They noted that some neighboring groups like the Toubou and Mober also came from Chad, though many centuries earlier.

¶4. (U) The Mahamid leaders argued that it would be practically impossible for the GON to chase them all down, given their numbers and the dispersion of their population and flocks. More ominously, they suggested that, were the GON to proceed with this plan, it would have to use force, as the community would resist and "oppose violence to violence." On a more moderate note, National Assembly Deputy Sileyman Ben Hamed, who represents many Mahamid Arabs in his Diffa constituency, stated that he and other National Assembly members would challenge the GON's expulsion order in court and in the legislature. Post believes that these members might convoke Interior Minister Modi and demand an explanation of this order.

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¶5. (C) Convoled by GON MFA Mindaoudou on the afternoon of the 25th, Ambassadors and Charges were treated to a fuller explanation of the GON's actions. In contrast to Interior Minister Modi's emphasis on crime and conflict, the FM emphasized the strain that the Mahamid Arabs' herds put on the pasturage and water table of the arid Diffa region. She noted that, when the Arabs first came, they had few animals. The GON had welcomed them as famine refugees and allowed them to stay. By the late 1990s the herds had grown to the point where they came into frequent conflict with local herders and farmers. These groups, along with the NGOs and religious leaders who represent them, first petitioned the GON to resolve this issues in 1999. At that time, the Minister noted, the GON declined to act against the Mahamid Arabs as there was "no durable solution" to their plight. FM stated that the GON was not clear on the number of persons to be expelled, or the timetable for the expulsion. She suggested that two weeks might be more reasonable than five days, but that the GON was "studying" the modalities. The FM stated that none of the persons being considered for expulsion were Nigerien citizens, and that the GON would never expel citizens. NOTE: Under Nigerien law, citizenship derives from birth in the country provided that at least one parent is a Nigerien citizen. END NOTE.

¶6. (C) The Chadian Ambassador appeared taken aback by these revelations, and asked why the Governments of Chad and Sudan, as the countries of origin, had not been consulted. He further noted that, were his government involved, it would contribute to a more orderly and humane transfer. Mindaoudou replied that the matter was an internal one, but that the GON would work with neighboring countries to ensure that the process was an "orderly, dignified action." Mindaoudou repeatedly emphasized that this action was not directed against Arabs per se, only against the nomadic Mahamid Arabs whose "large herds" were causing hardships for Nigerien herders and farmers. She touched on the issue of banditry and crime, but, with representatives of the Ministry of Land Management at her side, seemed more inclined to emphasize the

natural resource limitations as motivations for the decision. While the FM closed the session with many questions left unanswered, she offered the curious observation that this was a "regional administrative decision."

COMMENT

17. (C) Post is unsure of the cause and timing of the expulsion order. The notion that it was made by regional officials in Diffa without the full concurrence of the Minister of the Interior and the President of Niger is inconceivable, given Niger's highly centralized administration. While the Governor of Diffa reportedly informed the Mahamid Arabs of the decision, it is unlikely that he made it himself. It appears that the GON may be trying to pass the buck out of Niamey. Moreover, while the Ambassador and Poloff have made several visits to the Diffa region since spring 2005, we have never heard any local contact raise the issue of the Mahamid Arabs; a fact that belies the GON's contention that this has been a hot issue for the locals and their leaders since the 1990s.

18. (C) Causality remains uncertain - as does the legal and logistical ability of the GON to implement its decision. With respect to the former, the GON may posit some sort of connection between the Mahamid community and the recent up-tick in banditry and violence in the area over the last few months (reftel). They may suspect a linkage between the Mahamids and Chadian rebels / bandits. Alternatively, they may wish to appease the neighboring Toubou community after recent rumblings of discontent - including the suggestion that the Revolutionary Armed Forces of the Sahel (FARS), a Toubou rebel group from the 1990s, was making a re-appearance. All in all, mounting anxiety over the combination of porous borders, banditry, arms and cigarette smuggling, and inter-ethnic tension may have contributed to a rash decision. Post will continue to monitor this situation and report. END SUMMARY.
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